

DEETH, FRANK EDWARD

MANUSCRIPTS

SPECIMENS

71 2009.085.05756

Speeches Honoring Abraham Lincoln

Franz Edward Oerth

From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection
(formerly referenced as Manuscript Files)



"TRUE GREATNESS"

A SERMON ON ABRAHAM LINCOLN



February
12, 1950

"But whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister, and whoso will be chief among you, let him be your servant." Matthew 20:26-27

FRANZ EDWARD OERTH, S.T.M., PASTOR

Olney Baptist Church

Chew St. E. of 3rd St. Phila., Penna.



ABRAHAM LINCOLN-TRUE GREATNESS

It has long been a debatable question, "Who was the greater, Washington or Lincoln?" Until the end of time there will be adherents on both sides of this question. We could probably resolve it by saying that each was great in his own sphere. One of them was "the Father of his Country"; the other might be thought of as the "Saviour of his Country!"

The purpose of a sermon on the life of Abraham should not be misunderstood. It is not our intention to hold up any man as an object of worship. However, there is so much good in this man, so much worthy of emulation, so much which can be profitable for us, that it would be nothing short of tragic if we were to ignore the contribution he has made. Let us examine the good in his life especially where that good is also set forth in the teachings of God's eternal Word.

There are many elements in the character of Lincoln which are in agreement with the characteristics of true greatness as revealed by the Bible. As we consider seven elements in his character which mark him out as a truly great man, we might profitably ask ourselves whether we possess any, or some, or all of these characteristics.

I

Our text indicates that true greatness is in proportion to the service which a man is able to render. We might apply to Lincoln the words of Mordecai to Queen Esther: "Who knows but thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" Lincoln, believing firmly in divine providence and guidance, was convinced that God had brought him to the presidency to fulfill a certain task. His life was in many ways a life of humbleness, but at the same time it was a life made

the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom."

Sincerely yours,
ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

I suppose the best remembered words of Lincoln, aside from his Gettysburg Address, are those at his second Inaugural. Spoken during the closing months of the Civil War, these words reveal the depths of his compassionate and forgiving spirit.

"With malice toward none, but with charity toward all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us finish the work that we are in --to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and orphans, to do all that may achieve a just and lasting peace among ourselves and all nations..."

Those are great words. In the Address Lincoln lays the blame for the war not only on the South, which he felt had caused the war, but upon the North too for not taking a firm stand sooner. He looked upon the war as a judgment from Almighty God. He felt that the entire country was guilty before God, and therefore paying a horrible price because of its sins.

A favorite saying of his was, "When I am gone, I want men to think of me as one who always plucked a thistle and planted a flower where he thought a flower would grow."

IV

The fourth element of greatness in Lincoln is revealed in the fact that he had a sense of true values. His statement concerning the Scriptures is a classic. He wrote, "I am profitably engaged in reading the Bible."

Take all of this Book on reason that you can and the balance by faith, and you will live and die a better man." There is no President who quoted the Bible as often or as aptly as he. He knew that there were many books which would prepare a man for life, but that there was only one Book which could prepare for life here and eternal life hereafter. If we know and master this Book we shall be wise indeed. He never went to a college or a law school; yet by mastering the Bible and diligently applying its wisdom to his other learning he was able to take a front place in the ranks of men.

G. Campbell Morgan, the British preacher, said that Lincoln was the greatest American because in his Gettysburg Address of November 1863 he said, "...that under God this nation shall have a new birth of freedom, that government of the people, by the people and for the people should not perish from the earth." Lincoln realized that "unless the Lord build the house, they labor in vain." He had insight to see that apart from God a nation could not succeed, but that under God it might prosper. He felt that democracy would come to its fullest fruition when it was in accord with the will of God.

Lincoln also evidenced the fact that he was aware of the true values of life by the proficiency he attained in his various endeavors. For to do well what you attempt is a sign that you understand life's true values. He gained fame in his youth as an expert log-splitter. He was also known everywhere as an adroit teller of tales. One of his stories illustrates not only his skill at this, but also the desirability of doing one thing well rather than many things poorly: A certain blacksmith thought he would make a

horseshoe; after a few blows with his hammer, however, he changed his mind and began to fashion something else. Then when that did not suit him, he changed his plan again. Finally, in disgust he threw the twisted iron into a barrel of water, and as it sputtered he exclaimed, "Well, at least I can make a fizzle out of it!" It is far better to be able to do one thing excellently, than to be jack of all trades but master of none. In his own life this truth is exemplified by his mastery of the English language. Most of the words he used are easily understood, many of them are monosyllables; yet his style is eloquent in its simplicity. His speeches are noted for their brevity-a rare accomplishment. He did not have the advantage of formal school training, but he specialized to the extent that he became master of his native tongue.

V

May we suggest, in the fifth place, that Lincoln showed himself to be a great man by his genuine humbleness. He hated all sham and pretense. His garb was a modest one. On one occasion, when he was attending a formal event, he was greatly embarrassed by the necessity of carrying a gold-topped cane and a hat which he did not know how to dispose of.

His humility is seen in his statement, "I was early brought to a living reflection that nothing in my power whatsoever would succeed without the direct assistance of the Almighty." You know, the Scripture says "If a man think himself to be something when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself." May God give us the grace to see ourselves as we really are, and to incorporate into our lives the word of Jesus, "Apart from Me ye can do nothing."

VI

Lincoln was a man of conviction. He used to say, "Be sure you are right before you go ahead. But in a course of action be fully persuaded a thing is wrong before you stop." In 1863 when the time came for him to call a Cabinet meeting to consider the freeing of the slaves, he found that his Cabinet was lined up solidly against the proposition. "Gentlemen," he said, "I promised God that if Lee were driven out of Pennsylvania I would free the slaves. I will not go back on my promise." When one considers the magnitude of that decision, it is little wonder that the Negroes look upon him as their greatest friend and benefactor. They think of him as one like Moses "...this same one did God send to be a ruler and deliverer."

VII

Finally, we may say that Lincoln was a devout man. The words of Exodus might be applied to him. "Moreover, thou shalt provide out of all the people, able men, such as those who fear God, men of truth..." Lincoln was great not only by virtue of the foregoing traits we have mentioned, but also because of this crowning one of devoutness.

At this point there is a great deal of controversy because of the many legends about Lincoln's infidelity. He never joined a Christian church, but he realized that this was a weakness. He was not, however, one who hated the Church. In 1850, in fact, when pews in churches had to be purchased, Lincoln and his wife, who was a Presbyterian, rented a pew in the First Presbyterian Church of Springfield, Ill. And let me tell you, a man as frugal as he, a man of his convictions, would never have paid for a pew if he

had not intended to use it. When he came to Washington, he rented a pew in the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church. He was an intimate friend of Bishop Simpson, the outstanding minister of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Recently, evidence has come to light proving that after hearing an address by the Bishop, Lincoln joined the Missionary Society of the Bishop's denomination, and gave a contribution of \$150. which made him a life member. Later he was made a director of the Board of Directors. The inference here is that this is conclusive to show he was a Christian. For it is highly improbable that the Society would have elected him if he were an unbeliever.

In his early years, it is true, he was assailed by doubts. But who of has not been so troubled? To use a personal illustration, a young man who entered the ministry through my instrumentality called me requesting an interview. I visited this student, whom I had baptised and often counselled, and learned that grave doubts had flooded into his mind. After a brief time of prayer together, his faith was as strong as ever. And when I was a college student, one of the boys who lived in our dormitory confided to several of us that he could no longer believe the Bible. Concerned, we told our minister, who said that he felt the boy would come out all right. In a few weeks his doubts dissipated, and today he is serving God in Texas.

The doubt of Lincoln's early years was used against him in a political campaign. Never one to wear his religion on his sleeve, feeling that his relation to God was a very personal thing, at first he ignored the attack. Finally some of his friends begged him to answer the charges lest he lose the

election. And so he published an open letter, part of which reads: "...I do not think that I myself could be brought to support for office a man whom I knew to be an enemy of or scoffer at religion."

He was not, then, a man devoid of faith. We cannot know, in the final analysis, whether or not he was a Christian. For "man look-eth on the outward appearance" only. Let us not judge, that we be not judged. Certainly in every way except the externality of formal church membership, we should say he was a Christian. His terminology was that of a Christian, not a skeptic. He was a man who depended upon God. He said one day, "Amid the great difficulties of my administration, when I could see no other resort, I would place my whole reliance upon God, knowing that He would decide for the right." Careful study of that quotation forces us to say that in one respect at least Lincoln knew more about the real purpose of prayer than a good many church members. For he conceived of it as a means not to get God over to his side, but as a way whereby God would reveal to him what was right and truthful, and help him to follow them. He believed the Bible to be the Word of God. In another place in that open letter which I cited he said, "...I have never denied the truth of the Scriptures."

What is more, he believed in immortality. When his step-brother informed him that his father was dying and urged a visit to him, Lincoln replied in a note, "Say to him that if we could meet now, it is doubtful whether it would not be more painful than pleasant, but that if it be his lot to go now, he will soon have a joyous meeting with many loved ones gone before, and where the rest of us, through the help of God, hope ere long to

join them."

It will interest you who are here this morning to know that the parents of Abraham Lincoln were Baptists, converted by the pioneer missionary preachers who went to the unsettled midwest early in the 19th century. A glance into his family tree reveals a great many Biblical names: Mordecai, Abraham, Levi, Thomas, Solomon, Bathsheba. So we know he had a religious heritage.

Say what we will, we cannot alter the situation one whit. The truth stands. Here we have evidence which we cannot put aside. Here is a man who believed in prayer, believed in God, in the Scriptures, in immortality, who supported the cause of missions. These are the qualities which cause us to infer that he was a godly man. And when you add to these the other traits which have already been enumerated: his conviction, his humbleness, his compassion, his sense of true values, his self-discipline, his sense of mission, that his life was to be one of service --these are characteristics of greatness which I challenged you as followers of Jesus Christ to have in your own lives.

This morning, eighty-five years after he has made his contribution to our world, we honor him. He was born in a log cabin; and though he was President, he died in a rooming house, having been carried there from the Ford Theatre after being shot by an assassin. Friends and a few of his Cabinet were with him at the last as that great heart ceased to beat and his bosom stilled, and those kind eyes closed for the last time. Then in the hush and stillness of that solemn and sad moment one of them said, "Now he belongs to the ages." He belongs to you and

11

me, to our children, and those who shall come after us. Let us determine by the help of God, that as citizens, as individuals, as Christians, we shall be truly great.

The End







11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65
66
67
68
69
70
71
72
73
74
75
76
77
78
79
80
81
82
83
84
85
86
87
88
89
90
91
92
93
94
95
96
97
98
99
100

